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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001085

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT, EUR/NB

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [CE](#) [NO](#) [JA](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Sri Lankan PM gives conciliatory speech re peace process, but Tamil Tigers ask for more

Refs: Colombo 1078, and previous

(U) Classified by Joseph L. Novak, Charge d'Affaires.  
Reasons: 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In a June 19 speech, PM Wickremesinghe urged the Tigers to return to the peace talks, underlining the GSL's willingness to move toward forming an interim administrative structure in the north/east. In a nearly immediate reaction, the Tigers said they wanted to see more details before making any commitments re the talks. Given recent tensions, the current give-and-take between the two sides is a net positive. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) PM'S SPEECH: Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe gave a pre-recorded speech on national TV the evening of June 19 dealing with the peace process. The speech was given in Sinhala, the language of Sri Lanka's majority community, with Tamil-language subtitles. In the approximately 20-minute address, the PM, who rarely gives TV speeches, began by providing a briefing on the recent Tokyo donors conference, emphasizing the international community's support for the peace track. (Note: An unofficial text of the PM's speech has been e-mailed to SA/INS.) The prime minister stressed that the government was in difficult financial circumstances, a situation which would be vastly improved via the international assistance pledged at Tokyo. (Note: In making this point, the PM was brushing aside criticism from some in the Opposition that Sri Lanka would become more indebted due to Tokyo, not less -- See Reftels.)

3. (SBU) REACHING OUT TO THE TIGERS: Turning to the current stalemate in the peace process, the PM was conciliatory toward the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Re the LTTE's recent reiteration of its long-standing demand for the formation of an interim structure in the north/east, the prime minister underscored that his government was committed to reaching an understanding on this issue. In this regard, the PM stated: "We plan to establish an interim council with the agreement of the LTTE that will safeguard the rights of all communities. We are committed to talking with the LTTE to come up with a practical solution to draw up this mechanism."

4. (SBU) Touching again on Tokyo and making a gesture to the Tamil community, Wickremesinghe went on to make clear that a major focus of international assistance would be rehabilitation and reconstruction in the war-torn north and east. Regarding these development efforts, the PM said the GSL was committed to ensuring LTTE involvement. On this point, he stated: "The LTTE will be involved in the implementation of development work in the north and east. We expect them to act with responsibility in this regard." Essentially conceding that the LTTE complaints in this area were largely accurate, the PM said the government had to vastly improve its record on assistance delivery, which he said was poor.

5. (SBU) CALLING FOR A RETURN TO TALKS: The PM said he deeply regretted the Tigers' decision not to attend the Tokyo conference. Underscoring this theme of the need for Tiger re-engagement in the process, the PM urged the group to return to the peace talks, so that issues could be worked out face-to-face and not through indirect communications. (Note: Citing various complaints, the LTTE pulled out of the peace talks in late April -- See Reftels.)

6. (SBU) LTTE REACTS IMMEDIATELY: The Tigers did not wait long before responding to the speech. In remarks posted on the pro-LTTE website "TamilNet" late June 19, chief Tiger spokesman Anton Balasingham was cited as saying that his group wanted more details re the government's offer. TamilNet quoted Balasingham as stating:

"He (the prime minister) has only repeated the statements he made at the Tokyo donors conference. This statement of intent, as we have already stated, cannot be the basis for negotiations...Operating within the confines of an entrenched constitution and facing a hostile president, Ranil's administration is resistant to offer anything substantial in the form of an interim administration..."

Balasingham, indicating that the peace track's agenda needed to be rethought, wrapped up by stating that the LTTE would discuss the matter further with the Norwegian government facilitators. (Note: After a short hiatus in contacts, Norwegian and LTTE representatives met on June 18 -- See Reftels.)

17. (C) OTHER REACTION: Queried about the PM's speech, Joseph Pararajasingham, a pro-LTTE MP for the Tamil National Alliance, basically echoed Balasingham's line. Pararajasingham said the prime minister and his government had to offer more "detailed" and "concrete" information to the LTTE re its interim council proposal. In Pararajasingham's eyes, the PM's comments were simply "too vague." Poloff also called the president's office, which said President Kumaratunga had not as of yet had any official reaction.

18. (C) COMMENT: Given recent tensions, which included the sinking of a LTTE ship on June 14 in a confrontation with the navy, the current give-and-take between the GSL and the LTTE is a net positive. This, in addition to the June 18 meeting between the LTTE and the Norwegians, provides some hope that the process may be headed into a less rocky period. That said, it is still too early to tell which direction events are headed, especially given continued LTTE anger over the ship incident. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

NOVAK